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Troubled Assassinations Panel Meets

Gonzales-Sprague Showdown

By Jeremiah O'Leary
Washington Star Staff Writer

The House Select Committee on Assassinations met today to try to reorganize itself and settle a dispute over the effort of Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez to fire Chief Counsel Richard A. Sprague.

The committee spent the first couple hours haggling over the rules it will follow if the investigation ever gets off the ground. One rule adopted specified that the names of witnesses will not be announced in advance of their appearance at committee hearings.

Despite the displeasure of the other committee members over the way Gonzalez, a Texas Democrat, summarily fired Sprague last week, the odds appeared to be that the chairman would win out in the end.

Several members expressed hope that the committee can settle the matter and get on with the new investigation of the murders of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But Gonzalez was said to be determined there can be no compromise that would enable Sprague to continue as chief counsel.

The other members resented Gonzalez' decision to fire Sprague without consulting them. The action came while most of them were out of town. But it appeared unlikely that they would revolt against the decision at today's showdown session.

GONZALEZ SEEMS to have all the aces in what he views as his struggle to gain control over his committee from Sprague, the aggressive infighter who successfully prosecuted the slayers of United Mine Workers leader Joseph (Jock) Yablonski. As chairman, Gonzalez had Sprague's name removed from the payroll and he has prevented Sprague's investigators from having further access to FBI files on the Kennedy-King cases.

Also on Gonzalez' side is congressional tradition. In theory Gonzalez can fire a committee staffer only with the consent of a majority of the committee, but in fact House committees do not join forces with a staff employe against the appointed chairman. Gonzalez, furthermore, has said he will not ask the House for an extension of the committee's work and funding when it expires March 31 unless Sprague is gone.

Discussion of financial and personnel matters was scheduled to follow adoption of the rules. Gonzalez received one draft of rules from Sprague but pronounced them unacceptable and sent a new set to all committee members.

WHEN GONZALEZ discharged Sprague on Feb. 10, he said the action was necessary because of Sprague's "intolerable conduct" and because the chief counsel had been insubordinate, deceitful and divisive.

Gonzalez wrote the rest of the committee that Sprague had by a variety of actions created a situation in which the committee had to choose between him and itself. D.C. Del. Walter E. Fauntroy, a Sprague supporter, rounded up all 11 members of the committee by phone and they directed Sprague to disregard the discharge notice.

But the committee's opposition was carefully stated so that their objection was to the chairman's taking an action that is reserved for the committee itself.

The whole controversy may in the end be fatal to the committee because the House was less than enthusiastic about reactivating the probe in the first place and finally approved only $84,000 a month until the end of March.

At that time Gonzalez will have to ask the House for more authority and funds to continue work that has been brought to a standstill by the Sprague-Gonzalez clash and by monetary constraints. The money available is not even enough to meet the existing payroll, let alone travel for investigators or witnesses.

If Gonzalez can gain acceptance of the rules and of his decision that the chief counsel must be replaced, it is just barely possible that the House will extend the committee's life further. But the feuding in the committee has increased the chances that the House next month will decide against reopening the Kennedy-King cases.